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ABSTRACT

This paper examines children's early attempts at describing events absent in space and time, referred to as the "reportative function." The first part of the paper offers some explanations for the late emergence of the reportative function in young children's speech. Part two presents examples of children's attempts to report past events and discusses them, with attention to: (1) the situations in which the reportative function is likely to occur; (2) the strategies used by the children; and (3) the means by which adults try to elicit the reportative function. With the exception of one example from an English-speaking child, the data which served as the basis for the study were collected from young Brazilian children, ages 1.8-2.0. Analysis of spontaneous speech samples revealed that the reportative function typically occurred in the context of adult-child dialogue. The topic was introduced by either the adult or child and was narrated in a question-answer mode with the adult asking questions in an attempt to elicit details of the event from the child. Level of success at using the reportative function was determined from the point of view of the hearer rather than the speaker; an attempt was considered successful if a hearer unfamiliar with the event could reconstruct it on the basis of the child's narration. Success seemed to depend primarily on two factors: (1) the child's ability to linguistically encode a sequence of events; and (2) the adult's ability to ask questions which would elicit the details of the event. (Author/AM)

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LEARNING HOW TO TELL IT LIKE IT IS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORTATIVE FUNCTION IN CHILDREN'S SPEECH[1]

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Although there have been several investigations of the early functions of children's speech (e.g. Bates 1976; Halliday 1975), relatively little research has been carried out on functions which emerge somewhat later. The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of one of these functions: the reportative function, which we have defined as the use of language to describe events absent in space and time. Our concern is not with events which occur in the immediate past but with those which occur anywhere from a few hours to a few days prior to the child's attempts to talk about them.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first, we offer some explanations for the late emergence of the reportative function in young children's speech. In the second, we present examples of children's attempts to report past events and discuss them with particular attention to: 1) the situations in which the reportative function is likely to occur; 2) the strategies used by the children; and 3) the means by which adults try to elicit the reportative function.

Emergence of the reportative function in child speech

In order to use the reportative function successfully, a child must have attained a certain level of communicative competence based on social, cognitive, and linguistic development (Stoel-Gammon and Cabral 1975). On the social level, s/he must be aware of the various functions for which language can be used. In the early stages, children use language primarily as a tool verbalizing in order to make their needs known and to obtain a desired response from those around them. Somewhat later they begin to use language to comment on and learn about the world immediately around them; even later they start talking about events absent in space and time.

There are several aspects of cognitive development which potentially relate to the emergence and successful use of the reportative function. If children are to talk about events in the past, they must first be able to recall and symbolically represent the event, a task which requires an understanding of object permanence as well as a certain level of memory development; they then must be able to encode the event linguistically and finally verbalize it. In symbolizing and encoding an event, they must be capable of segmenting a string of activities into discrete parts, and then of sequencing these parts in such a way that a hearer, upon hearing the narration, can reconstruct the sequence of events for him/herself.

Linguistically, if children are to be successful in reporting past events, they must, at the very least, make themselves understood. On the

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phonological level this means that their pronunciation must be close enough to the adult model that the hearer can recognize the words being spoken. The level of accuracy of pronunciation can vary according to the hearer; it can deviate further from the model when the hearer is familiar with the child's phonological system than when s/he is not.

On the grammatical level, children must have acquired the basic syntactic patterns of the mother tongue, e.g. standard word order and intonational patterns, the use of some grammatical morphemes. In addition, they must include the topic and, in some cases, person-of-discourse (marked by a personal pronoun or verb inflection) so that the hearer will know who or what is being talked about. In some narrations, correct use of the definite and indefinite articles is essential to let the hearer know if the person or thing referred to is a specific or undetermined one.

Finally, the children must have a vocabulary adequate to express their ideas, and must use the words appropriately with regards to semantic content. For example when they say "dog," they must be referring to the same class of animals that adults refer to with the same word, and not to some larger (or smaller) set of animals.

The more complex the narrative, the more explicit the child must be. If, for example, the entire narrative centers around a single object, correct use of topic and of person-of-discourse is not so crucial. This point is nicely illustrated by Halliday (1975: p. 111) who cites a narrative (produced by his son) which contains no grammatical elements, but is understandable entirely on the basis of the lexical items and the order in which they were presented. The narrative was: "Tree. Broken. Take away. All gone. Bye-bye." Except for not knowing who took the tree away, the hearer/reader can pretty well reconstruct the event being described.

Examples and discussion of children's use of the reportative function

The examples which appear below represent various aspects of the emergence and development of the reportative function in children 20-24 months old. In analyzing these examples, we judged the child's performance not in terms of some linguistic measure like MLU, but in terms of the overall success of the narrative from the hearer's point of view. An attempt at using the reportative function was considered successful if a hearer unfamiliar with the event could reconstruct it on the basis of the narration. If a hearer could not reconstruct the event, it was considered a failure. In most of the examples which follow, it is not a case of total success or total failure, but a mixture of the two.

With the exception of one, the examples are drawn from spontaneous speech samples collected from three Brazilian children. The data were gathered for a series of studies of language development in Portuguese and at the time of data collection there was no idea of doing the present study. Thus, the dialogues cited below occurred as a spontaneous part of adult-child interactions.

Contexts in which the reportative function generally occurred

In looking through the speech samples, we noticed patterns of occurrence of the reportative function. First, unlike adult narrations which are typically a monologue in which the sequence of events is related from beginning to end, the children's attempts at reporting events usually took place in the context of dialogue with the adults asking questions and acting as prompters.

Second, there were certain situational settings in which the reportative function was likely to occur; in the examples below, we focus on two of these. The first is when one adult is with the child at the time an event takes place, and later asks the child to relate the event to a third person. A typical example is that of a mother and child who visit the zoo in the morning and in the evening the mother asks her child to tell the father what they saw. The dialogue is initiated by the mother who begins by saying something like: "Tell Daddy what we did this morning." From then on, the dialogue continues with the mother prompting the child by asking questions, e.g. "What did we see first?" or "What was the lion doing?" etc. It is possible that elicitation of the reportative function in this manner serves as a kind of training by which the adult indicates to the child which elements of an event are to be encoded.

In the second type of situational setting, the dialogue is initiated by the child who wants to report a past event. In the early stages of development of the reportative function, such dialogues are often frustrating for both adult and child in that the latter is often incapable of giving a clear description of the incident, and the former is at a loss as to which questions will serve to prompt the child's narration. For example, a child may arrive home from a visit at a friend's house and announce: "Fell. Fell. Tree." If there are no extra-linguistic cues, it is impossible for the mother to know if the child fell from the tree, if one of his friends fell, or if it was the tree that fell. When there is extra-linguistic information, i.e. if the child has torn pants and a bruised knee, the mother has a better chance of understanding the child's narration. She may then seek additional information by asking: "Did you fall from the tree?" or "Were you climbing trees?"

Examples

In the examples below, utterances spoken by adults are preceded by A, those spoken by children are preceded by C.

Example I (subject's age 23 months, 3 weeks; MLU 2.5)

1 A: Conta que papai matou a cobra.	1 A: Tell how daddy killed the snake.
C: M-m?	C: Huh?
2 A: Onde foi? Conta. Onde?	2 A: Where was it? Tell us. Where?
C: Matou assim 'ba' a cobra 'ba'.	C: Killed like this 'pow' the snake 'pow'. (gesturing)
3 A: É o que aconteceu com a cobra?	3 A: And what happened to the snake?
C: Papai bateu martelo. Bateu a cara dele.	C: Daddy hit it (with a) hammer. Hit it on the head.
4 A: É.	4 A: Uh-huh.
C: É.	C: Uh-huh.

5 A: E a cobra morreu?
C: Morreu.
6 A: M-m. E era...
C: Papai pegou.
7 A: E era uma cobra malvada?
C: É. Caiu no chão. Fez. A cobra caiu no chão bũ. Bateu a cuca.

5 A: And the snake died?
C: (It) died.[2]
6 A: Hm-m. And it was...
C: Daddy grabbed it.
7 A: And it was a bad snake?
C: Yes. (It) fell on the ground. (It) did. The snake fell on the ground boom. Hit it on the head.

This example illustrates the first situational setting described above -- one adult, familiar with the incident, asks the child to relate it to another adult who does not know what happened. The adult tries to elicit the narration but in some cases the child appears to ignore the questions and simply tells the story in his own way. For instance, in #2, the adult asks where and the child does not answer where but how, perhaps in response to the adult's original question. Also, in #6 and #7, the adult's questions remain unanswered.

If we measure success from the point of view of the hearer, this example must be considered a success. The child provides enough detail to allow a hearer unfamiliar with the event to reconstruct what happened. It should be noted that the topic of discourse is properly included in the child's utterances, thereby letting the hearer know when a statement refers to the father and when it refers to the snake.

Example II (subject's age 22 months, 3 weeks; MLU 1.5)

1 C: Mamãe.
A: Uhn?
C: Caiu. Caiu; 'ta lá.
2 A: O que?
C: Caiu; 'ta lá.
3 A: O que que caiu?
C: [doja dodó] 'ta lá
4 A: Antonia jogou?
C: É.
5 A: O que?
C: [e]...isso.
6 A: Isso? O que que Antonia jogou?
C: [a o bolé]
7 A: Uhn?
C: Outro...[ačičiña]
8 A: Tangerina?
C: É.
9 A: Jogou?
C: É.

1 C: Mommy.
A: Huh?
C: Fell. Fell; it's over there.
2 A: What?
C: Fell; it's over there.
3 A: What fell?
C: (unintelligible) it's over there.
4 A: Antonia threw it away?
C: Yeah.
5 A: What (did she throw away)?
C: Uh-h/It is (?).....this.
6 A: This? What did Antonia throw away?
C: (unintelligible)
7 A: Huh?
C: Other...(unintelligible)
8 A: Tangerine?
C: Yeah.
9 A: She threw it away?
C: Yeah.

This example illustrates the second situational setting described above; the child obviously remembers the incident but is unsuccessful in trying to recount it. The hearer, in this case the child's mother, is clearly unable to reconstruct what happened on the basis of her daughter's utterances. The

lack of success can be attributed to a number of causes. First, several of the child's responses are inappropriate; for instance in #2 and #3, the mother asks "What fell?" and the child responds "Fell; it's over there.", essentially a repetition of her initial utterance. Second, several of the child's utterances are unintelligible: #3, #6, and #7. Third, some of the utterances are ambiguous, e.g. in #1 and #2, there is no agreement in the tenses of the two verbs; #5 has several possible interpretations. Fourth, the child does not seem to know the word for the object her mother wants her to name. Fifth, the child actually misinforms her mother at one point; in #7 she produces a word which her mother interprets as tangerina 'tangerine', and in #8 she confirms her mother's interpretation of the word. Somewhat later, the mother asked Antonia (the babysitter) if something happened with a tangerine, and was told that there was no tangerine involved in the incident. Finally, this attempt at using the reportative function is a failure in part not because of the child's utterances, but because the setting provided no extra-linguistic clues which would help the mother figure out what was going on, and thus permit her to ask the right questions.

Example III (subject's age 20 months; MLU 1.3)

1 A: Quando você foi na praia, você brincou na areia?	1 A: When you went to the beach, did you play in the sand?
C: Brincou areia.	C: Played (in the) sand.
2 A: É.	2 A: M-hm. (confirmation)
C: É.	C: M-hm. (")
3 A: Que mais?	3 A: What else?
C: Brincou areia.	C: Played (in the) sand.
4 A: Você brincou com agua também?	4 A: Did you play in the water too?
C: Mar. Praia.	C: Ocean. Beach.
5 A: Você gosta da onda? A onda é grande, ein, R?	5 A: Do you like the waves? The waves are big, aren't they, R?
C: É.	C: Yeah.
6 A: Você brinca na areia?	6 A: Do you play in the sand?
C: Na areia. É. Brinca na areia, brinca.	C: Play in the sand. Yeah. Play in the sand, play.
7 A: Você levou o carro na areia?	7 A: Did you take the car to the beach?
C: Carro na areia.	C: Car to the beach.
8 A: Levou?	8 A: Did you take it?
C: O moto. O moto.	C: The motorcycle. The motorcycle.
9 A: É?	9 A: Yes? (You did?)
C: Levou a moto.	C: Took the motorcycle.
10 A: A moto?	10 A: The motorcycle?
C: Moto.	C: Motorcycle.
11 A: É?	11 A: Yes?
C: Levou, levou areia.	C: Took it, took it (to the) beach.

This example is included as an illustration of one of the typical strategies children adopt when an adult tries to elicit the reportative function. Instead of presenting new information, the child simply imitates part of the adult utterance; this strategy can be seen in #1, 3, 6, 7, and 10. It should

be pointed out that the child's responses are not strict imitations of the adult however, since the adult used a question intonation while the child used a statement intonation. In only two instances does the child introduce something new into the dialogue; in #4 he utters "Ocean. Beach.", two lexical items which are semantically linked to the previous utterances; in #8 he reports after some prompting, that he took his toy motorcycle, rather than his car, to the beach.

Example IV (subject's age 20 months, 3 weeks; MLU 1.5)

1 A: P, onde que você foi hoje, m-m?	1 A: P, where did you go today, hm?
C: M-m?	C: Huh?
2 A: Onde foi?	2 A: Where did you go?
C: (no response)	C: (no response)
3 A: Foi de carro com o papai?	3 A: Did you go for ride with daddy?
C: É.	C: Yeah.
4 A: Foi, é? Onde foi, m-m?	4 A: You did, did you? Where did you go, hm?
C: (no response)	C: (no response)
5 A: Foi o papai que guiou ou foi a mamãe?	5 A: Did daddy drive or was it mommy?
C: (no response)	C: (no response)
6 A: O papai guiou?	6 A: Did daddy drive?
C: É.	C: Yeah.

This example illustrates a common strategy adopted by adults trying to elicit a narrative from a child. The adult clearly controls the dialogue; she begins by asking a wh- question, #1 and #2, and then when the child fails to respond, she switches to a yes/no question (#3) apparently feeling that the latter is easier to answer. The pattern is repeated in #4, 5, and 6.

Example V (subject's age 20 months, 3 weeks; MLU 1.5)

1 C: Caiu chão ... pa, pa.	1 C: Fell (on the) ground...boom,boom.
A: Você caiu...caiu chão pa. Você caiu lá na escola?	A: You fell down...fell down ground, boom. Did you fall at the school?
C: É.	C: Yeah.
2 A: Como foi?	2 A: How did it happen?
C: (points to head) o...o dodoi.	C: (points to head) the...the owie.
3 A: Fez dodoi mesmo. Como foi, ein, que você caiu? Quem te empurrou no chão?	3 A: It did make an owie. How did it happen, huh, that you fell down? Who pushed you down?
C: M-m?	C: Huh?
4 A: Quem empurrou?	4 A: Who pushed?
C: M-m?	C: Huh?
5 A: Você caiu la na escola?	5 A: Did you fall there at school?
C: É.	C: Yeah.
6 A: É.	6 A: M-hm.
C: É.	C: M-hm.
7 A: Como foi?	7 A: How did it happen?
C: (points to head) Aqui.	C: (points to head) Here.

As in Example II, the child initiates the dialogue, trying to relate a past event. There are several aspects of interest; first, looking at the child's utterances, we note the use of gesture in #2 and #7. In #2, the gesture actually provides new information by communicating the location of the "owie." Second, regarding the adult-child interactions, we note that in #1, the adult repeats the child's utterance, apparently to show that she understood what had been said; then she adds two new elements to the narration -- the pronoun você 'you,' clarifying who it was that fell[3] and the words na escola 'at school,' indicating the locale in which the incident took place.

The adult then proceeds to seek additional information about the event in #2, #3, and #4. In responding to the question posed in #2, the child answers by talking about, and pointing to, the consequence of the fall, instead of talking about how he fell. (The same sequence occurs again in #7.) Regarding the questions in #3 and #4, the child does not seem to understand them. It may be that no one pushed, but that he fell on his own in which case the questions are inappropriate and the child's apparent incomprehension in understandable. In #5, it seems that the adult backtracks after two questions which have remained unanswered, and tries to reestablish a fact which had been agreed upon earlier -- that the child fell at school. In sum, two facts emerge from the narration: 1) the child fell down; and 2) he has a sore spot on his head.

Example VI (subject's age 20 months)
1 C: try eat lid
A: What tried to eat the lid?
C: try eat lid
A: What tried to eat the lid?
C: goat...man said no...goat try eat lid...man said no.
2 C: goat try eat lid...man said no.
A: Why did the man say no?
C: goat shouldn't eat lid...(shaking head) goodfor it.
A: The goat shouldn't eat the lid; it's not good for it.
C: goat try eat lid...man said no...goat shouldn't eat lid...(shaking head) goodfor it.

This example was taken from Halliday 1975 (p. 112). The dialogues were produced after Nigel, Halliday's son, was taken to the zoo where, at one point, he was petting a goat with one hand while holding a plastic lid in the other. When the goat tried to eat the lid, the zoo-keeper intervened and told Nigel that it wasn't good for the goat to eat the lid.

Later in the day the dialogue in #1 occurred and that evening the dialogue #2 took place. Very briefly, the following features are of interest: 1) Nigel included the topics of discourse in his utterances; except for his first two statements, the key figures in the scenario, the man and the goat, are consistently named; 2) Nigel's utterances form a clear sequential pattern which reflects the temporal order of events as they occurred. The utterances seem to build on one another so that by the end, all parts of the narrative are presented in the correct order; and 3) as in the previous example, the child uses a gesture, in this case shaking his head, to communicate part of the story.

In conclusion, we want to point out that we view this as a preliminary study of the reportative function in children's speech. By analyzing a number of examples of early use of the function, a representative sample of which appears in the text above, we have tried to identify the strategies adopted by children in their attempts at using the function and by adults in eliciting it; we have also sought to determine the situational settings in which the function is likely to occur. The examples show, first of all, that children under the age of 2;0 are able to use the reportative function, and second, that they use it with varying degrees of success. The level of success is not dependent on a single factor such as level of linguistic development measured by MLU, but on a number of inter-related factors including the amount of interest the child has in reporting an event (cf. examples II and IV) and the adult's prior knowledge of the event (cf. examples I and II or V), as well as the child's level of social, linguistic and cognitive development. Another factor is the amount of impact the event made on the child, a factor related to the level of interest in re-telling the event.

Finally, we feel that two aspects of the study merit special attention in future research. (1) The strategies adopted by children: how are individual differences observed in these strategies related to differences in linguistic, cognitive, and/or social development? Are the strategies developmentally ordered? (2) The strategies adopted by adults in eliciting the reportative function: what is the range of strategies used? How are they modified according to the level of the child? Research in these areas will provide us with a better understanding of the development of the reportative function.

FOOTNOTES

1. Requests for reprints should be addressed to the first author: Child Language Acquisition Study, CD-393 (WJ-10), Univ. of Washington, Seattle, WA. 98195. Some of the examples cited are from the second author's doctoral dissertation "A explanação linguística em gramaticas emergentes" (1976, Univ. of São Paulo).
2. The third person is indicated by the verbal inflection, but is not represented here (and in subsequent utterances) by a separate pronoun.
3. The verb used by the child is inflected for third, rather than first, person.

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